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ABSTRACT

One promising alternative to the traditional workshop format of inservice teacher education is to bring researchers and teachers more closely together, in classrooms, where the two groups can work as a team addressing those needs the teachers have defined. A teacher and a researcher collaborated in a 3-month effort to improve the way the teacher conducted her reading group discussions. The discussions were videotaped and then analyzed to reveal the types, patterns, and frequencies of the teacher's questions, her students' responses, and her feedback. The teacher was also videotaped while being interviewed by the researcher. When the teacher realized that she was controlling the class discussion most of the time, the teacher and researcher collaborated in changing the way the teacher led her reading group discussions. By the end of the 3 months, the teacher had completely reversed her opinion considering the ability of second graders to engage in discussions about the stories they read. The reading groups had changed into teacherless discussions in which the students actively participated in discussions with each other. This collaboration succeeded beacuse the teacher: (1) gained a new perspective on her assumptions and performance through the use of videotape; (2) identified her own need for change, in collaboration with the researcher; and (3) worked toward a solution, in her own classroom, with a non-threatening, informed collaborator. (RS)

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TEACHER/RESEARCHER COLLABORATION, TEACHER CHANGE, AND READING GROUP DISCUSSIONS: *"WHAT CAN'T MY KIDS DO?"*

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Editorial Note: All *italicized* text that of Jeanne Huxtable

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Here we go again, another study. All I want or care to know is: when will this be over? What can I possibly get out of this? My reading discussions are good.

December 1986

These last three months have made me reflect on my whole teaching style . . . I can't believe this is the same group of children . . ."

May 1987

Primarily, the goal of all staff development programs is to promote student learning. The consensus as to how one may achieve this involves bringing about substantive teacher change. In the past, we've seen the utilization of formats such as district-wide institutes, regional conferences, building-level in-service workshops, and curriculum revision committees, as avenues through which new ideas are disseminated to the rank-and-file. Those who invest a great deal of energy first identifying the needs of teachers, then formulating clearly stated objectives, planning the content, selecting the presentation methods, finding speakers for the sessions, evaluating the efficacy of the program, and, finally, structuring a follow-up assistance plan for such dissemination efforts, hope that teachers will change as a result of the new insights, and, therefore, student learning will be facilitated.

Many dissemination efforts fall short of their intended goal (Yarger, Howey, & Joyce, 1981). Consider the ways in which decisions regarding the dissemination of information are generally made. Teachers are asked to fill out a needs assessment questionnaire. The person charged with organizing the dissemination plan--usually a person removed from the classroom context--surveys these then makes a decision as to the content of the sessions. Due to the fact that these decisions are usually made with large numbers of teachers in mind, compromise is inevitable, and instructional ideas are

often disseminated in piecemeal fashion. In the end, teachers are left alone to figure out how the new idea relates to their classroom.

Specifically, the typical "one-shot" workshop, or more recently, the on-going series of workshops, remain inattentive to the individual needs of the teacher (cf. Bents & Howey, 1981). Such efforts neglect to address three critical steps in the process of change. First, teachers are not allowed to attain a new perspective on their present assumptions about learning, nor on their philosophies, goals and methods. Secondly, teachers are not given the opportunity to define the changes that have to be made as a problem which could be solved. Thirdly, teachers are given little or no on-going feedback with which to solve the problem.

One promising alternative to the traditional workshop format is to bring researchers and teachers more closely together, in classrooms, where the two groups can work as a team addressing those needs the teachers have defined (Tierney, Tucker, Gallagher, Pearson, & Crismore, in press). In the remaining portions of this paper, we will outline the three-month collaborative effort in which Jeanne, a teacher, and I, a researcher, worked to improve the ways Jeanne conducted her reading group discussions. We will discuss both the structure and results of our collaboration, and then use the experience as a basis for suggesting an alternative for building-level staff development, which exploits teacher/researcher and teacher/teacher collaboration.

Developing Insight Into Assumptions, Performance and Needs

Much of what drives classroom instruction are those assumptions teachers have acquired during their pre-service and in-service experience. These assumptions surface in the ways teachers structure learning tasks.

In my case, for example, one basic assumption guided my teaching: I always felt that second graders were too young to ever do anything on their own. They had to be told what to do and reminded of what to do next, every step of the way. It was my job to motivate them, keep them on task, and to praise

their work. They would be lost without me; after all, I was the one who knew what they were supposed to learn and they were the ones who needed to listen and get it from me.

An assumption, in effect, determines the upper and lower limits of what we expect from our students. Barnes and Todd (1977) made an insightful connection between the effect of one's teaching assumptions upon subsequent expectations and methods when they wrote,

> Many notions of schooling present pupils as passive receivers of learning. Teachers know, but pupils do not; if they do, they know imperfectly. More importantly, it seems to be often assumed that if children are to approach a deeper knowledge, or to increase their understanding, this will only be possible under the direct guidance and control of the teacher. (p. ix)

As a result of assumptions such as these, teachers may run the risk of designing lessons which are based more upon intuition (i.e., believing the assumptions we possess) than one which is actually based upon learning theory. This is most apperent when examining Jeanne's former approach to discussions.

We used to sit at our table and begin every story with a question like, "Can anyone tell me the title of our story today?" This was my way of getting second-graders settled and focused. Next, we'd read the story orally, a page at a time, because I believed it was all their minds could handle. At the end of each page, we would stop and I would ask all of the questions, most of them spontaneous, although I did use a combination of the questions from the manual and some of my design. My students were required to raise their hands. I would monitor the turn-taking and then give them feedback to their answers. Almost every discussion ended with the question, "Did you like the story?"

In every discussion, I had two basic goals. First, I was concerned with reading comprehension. I wanted to make sure that the children understood whatever I thought the main idea seemed to be, as well as other important parts of the story, like plot, theme, or characters. Secondly, I wanted to make sure that

each student had the opportunity to participate in the group. It was important that they pay attention, follow along, and listen to me. By doing these, they would be able to answer my questions and, therefore, comprehend what happened in the story.

Once a teacher establishes a particular discussion format like Jeanne had, and perfects that structure over the years, it becomes extremely difficult to see alternative formats with an open mind, especially when those alternatives are radically different from the one that is in place, and operating predictably. Before an alternative discussion format is considered "feasible," there has to be a reason to change, a major bug in the present system has to be unearthed. Unfortunately, these pedagogical bugs are difficult to detect on one's own.

The first step in bringing about change, then, is to examine the methods used in relation to the goals desired. Jeanne and I were able to do this by analyzing two sources of data. First, the videotapes allowed us to investigate and describe the types, patterns, and frequencies of her questions, her students' responses, and her feedback found in the group discussions. We also examined the lines of thought she initiated and determined how long these were sustained. We measured the cumulative amount of time that she or her students controlled the discussion.

The second source of data was an interview, conducted by me, while she watched herself on tape.

We found that Jeanne controlled the floor of the discussion 56% of the time, while six students, collectively, managed to control it 32% of the time. Most of the questions or comments she initiated were either literal questions or transition statements to a new line of thought. To our surprise, a new line of thought was introduced approximately every 45 seconds. In other words, Jeanne would summarize the story for the group, introduce and terminate lines of thought at her discretion, while stopping only long enough to ask either a literal or inferential question which was designed to "check their comprehension" of a local aspect in the story. The following excerpt is indicative of her former discussion style.

I saw a teacher who was at first familiar, though, as we watched more and more of the tape, she became increasingly unrecognizable. She was sitting at the head of a rectangular table, leaning forward in her chair, as her students sat back in theirs. Sometimes the children would wave their hands frantically when she asked a question and she would unenthusiastically call on one and allow them to answer, though they didn't elaborate on an answer nor did many discuss a personally related experience. If they did respond too long, I noticed that the teacher became uneasy and looked for ways to quickly cut them off. She exuded confidence in the ways she managed the group, in her body language, and in how the discussion seemed to begin and end on schedule.

That teacher, of course, was me. Clearly, my goal of helping them comprehend wasn't being met because I was doing all of the important thinking for them--I comprehended the story and they listened to my interpretation of it, from beginning to end. And too, as I listened to my voice echo through the room, I realized I had forgotten my goal of getting each student to participate.

It was now obvious to me why my kids looked lifeless, as if they were mesmerized by a television, behaving like trained animals: question, response, feedback; question, response, feedback. You'd think I was a game show host, like on Jeopardy, *playing trivial pursuit. I had to change what I was doing, because deep down I knew they weren't learning.*

The problem was an intriguing one, especially from a researcher's point of view. Clearly, Jeanne had tapped many of the techniques one usually invokes when trying to get reluctant students to elaborate upon their answers or interact with each other. It occurred to me at the time that traditional discussion approaches, where the teacher is at the helm, do not allow students to fully showcase their comprehension or discourse prowess. Just as Jeanne recognized the need to make a change in her classroom and expand her pedagogical knowledge, I realized her classroom could serve as the testing ground for improving small group discussions.

Teacher/Researcher Collaboration: In Support of Classroom Change

Too often, researchers and teachers feel in opposition, as if each belongs to a distinct group. As a result, the former has been falsely accused of being "too idealistic, always touting those pie-in-the-sky ideas," while the latter has been mistakenly described as "too entrenched to see past their noses."

But we are entrenched in certain ways. As a classroom teacher, you can get set in your ways. You may try new things, but they're small. If they work, you think you're improving as a teacher. It's not that we want to get set in our ways; it's just easier to fall into a routine, especially when everyone around you is falling into the same routine. Learning new ideas and collaborating on them is very difficult. There is no time to talk with another teacher about new approaches, unless you can do it in the twenty minutes you have before school, the thirty minutes you have for lunch or the fifteen minutes you have for recess.

Together and armed with a mutual understanding of the wisdom both possess, however, the researcher and teacher can form an effective team through which assumptions can be questioned, needs can be identified, and exploration may thrive. Between the two, balance can be achieved, with the teacher buffering and shaping the researcher's incessant willingness to experiment, and the researcher helping the teacher gain a new perspective on teaching philosophies and methods. The two, in concert, can suspend an approach, much like a mobile, and examine it from various angles.

John helped me to entertain a number of "What if?" possibilities. He asked lots of questions which started lengthy discussions: What if I didn't control the floor so much, what would my kids do as a result? What if I let them monitor their own turn-taking and comprehension, would they still learn? What if I allowed them to ask the clarifying questions and provide the feedback to their responses? But one particular question echoed in my mind for a long time: Should there be a difference in the way second- graders discuss a story from the way adults discuss a story? At the time, I answered, "Yes,

definitely." I remember thinking, how could he possibly think young children could lead their own discussions.

At any rate, the questions helped me welcome a change. Eventually, I realized that I had to ask different types of questions in my discussion groups, questions which had to go beyond yes or no answers. John helped me realize that I had to leave the group, and make them responsible for their own discussions. All along, he was trying to show me in a non-threatening way what my kids could do without me.

Typically, I would spend two consecutive days in Jeanne's classroom videotaping and observing her efforts every two weeks. After school each of those days, we'd meet in the library and reflect upon the day's triumphs and disappointments. We would focus on her changing role in the discussions, how much she should direct the discussions, what questions she could ask, how she might deal with individuals who weren't contributing or those who talk too much, and the like. A revised version of her methods would always emerge.

During the times John couldn't make it to my classroom, I would audiotape the discussion. I would then listen to the tapes that night, talk to John on the phone, and together, we'd talk about the questions I'd created for the next story. Occasionally, he'd send me an article to read, and we'd discuss what it meant to our ideas. Sometimes, the frustration level was very high, especially on those days when nothing seemed to happen in the discussion. Sharing that frustration with someone else helped immensely.

After three months, Jeanne's discussions had changed dramatically. She was now floating in and out of the group at the students' command ("We're ready for you, Ms. Huxtable!"). Her students were now monitoring their own discourse, invoking such rules as, "One at a time," and "Stay on the subject," when the particular rule was needed. They were asking each other clarifying questions, stating whether they agreed or disagreed with each other, justifying their interpretations of

the text, building inferences as a group, and summarizing parts of the text or the whole text when they wanted to prove a point.

I'd gone from initiating about seven questions and comments per minute to asking three, carefully chosen, provocative questions which would frame the entire discussion. Immediately, I found out how articulate my students really were. They were adept at summarizing the story and bringing in relevant background experience whenever it was appropriate to do so. Now, it is clear to me that I don't need to "check their comprehension" of the stories before they can discuss really interesting questions. I'm able to sit back and listen to them when they argue a point, question each other's comprehension, and dive in and out of the story as a resource for discussion. I have to keep pinching myself and ask, "What can't my kids do?!"

Consider the following excerpted portion of one of Jeanne's "teacherless" discussions. Jeanne's students were discussing a story regarding a boy who was upset about the fact his library was being demolished in lieu of another, and he would not have a quiet place to read his books. The question they were trying to answer was, "What was the author trying to tell us in the story?"

S6: He's trying to tell us that, uh, like he's trying to tell us what the story is mostly about.

S4: No--

S3 & S5: He's trying to tell us--

S2: Shhhh.

S1: One at a time.

S5: He's trying to tell us that both of the brothers--not both of them, but Matthew wanted a quiet place.

S3: Both of them wanted a quiet place.

S6: No, the author . . . the author, he's trying to tell us . . . he's trying to help us. He . . . he--

S3: I think . . . I disagree.

S6: He's a community helper. He has to help us. He's trying to help us by telling us about this story.

S5: Why do you disagree?

S3: I disagree because authors, um, the author is telling and putting in the story that both of them wanted a quiet place.

S6: Uh uh. Uh uh. Uh uh. It ain't got no two people in here that wanted a quiet place. It said one person in here wanted to have a quiet place.

S2: Quiet place.

S6: And that's Matthew. He wanted to have a quiet place. But the house wasn't no quiet place for him. So he found a place outside, but--

S2: On the hill.

S6: But it was going to be autumn, so he said he was going to go place hunting. He was going to look for a house inside.

S3: I think . . .

S6: And then when summer came again, he would go back to his comfortable treetop.

S3: But you don't know that. You don't know that. That's not in "A Quiet Place." They didn't show it. They didn't show when summer came back.

S6: It said it. It says at the end [looking through the story] it says that he said when summer come back he was going back to his quiet place.

S4: I think the author . . . I think the author tried to get us to get a quiet place for when we go somewhere to read our books . . . you know, our school books.

S6: Yeah.

The two quotes found at the opening of this article are a testament to the amount of change Jeanne experienced in three months. When the month of June brought our collaboration to an end,

I repeated the question about whether there should be a difference in the way students and adults discuss stories.

At first, I thought there was no way an adult and a second-grader could communicate, on the same level, about the same story. There are obvious prior knowledge differences, and because of these, I was certain that a second-grader would not be able to understand any adult interpretation I might have after reading a story. And yet, after seeing how my kids were able to discuss and learn on their own, with very little actual guidance on my part, I realized how intelligent and articulate these kids can be.

My answer to the question a second time around was an emphatic, "No!" More importantly I've learned that second-graders can engage in discussions on their own terms. In fact, when you're standing back listening to them, or watching them on videotape, they remind you of the discussions you might have over coffee on a Friday night, after seeing a movie with friends.

Empowering the Teacher as a Change Agent

If one were to examine the various staff development frameworks in use today, one would find three generic models, all of which point to the need of a change agent. The most widely used format is what has been called the directed development model (Meyer, in press), which advocates the need for an assertive, controlling change agent, whose job it is to identify the needs of the teachers, and spearhead the implementation of the means through which change is facilitated. The mutual adaptation model (Berman & McGlaughlin, 1975) involves open communication and collaboration between change agents and teachers during the planning and implementation stages of the effort. And lastly, the teacher-as-researcher model (Tierney, et al., in press) brings researchers into the classrooms of teachers, and, through a collaborative effort, the two propose, design, and direct informal instructional studies which are based upon questions the teacher deems relevant.

Our effort most resembles the teacher-as-researcher model, though, in actuality, invoked aspects of all three at various times. At times, I took more control, as an "expert," while at others, Jeanne and I worked side-by-side trying to shape the discussion method as it evolved.

We believe the collaboration worked because we avoided the common pitfalls of traditional dissemination procedures. First, most programs are too vague with respect to their own goals and procedures. Secondly, and most critically, individual teacher interests and needs are generally not taken into account during planning and implementation (Gallagher, Goudvis, & Pearson, in press). We've avoided both by remaining loyal to three important characteristics of change. First, Jeanne gained a new perspective on her assumptions and subsequent performance, aided by the use of videotape. Secondly, in collaboration, she identified her own need for change as a result of seeing the discrepancy between her goals and her performance. Thirdly, she worked towards a solution, in her own classroom, with a non-threatening, informed collaborator.

What happens now, after our collaboration has run its course? One other notable staff development effort, the Metcalf Project (Tierney, et al., in press) has attempted to empower the participating teachers with the expertise to become change agents for other staff members in their building. We concur with the spirit of this approach, where teachers work closely with researchers, build innovations in the context of their classrooms, and move into collaborative relationships with other, willing teachers. *It is not too difficult, for example, to imagine how my classroom could now become a living, in-house illustration of teacherless discussion groups, where my fellow teachers could see the methods in operation.* As teachers choose to join Jeanne's growing corps of change agents, so too will they go through the process of questioning, defining, and solving--each a key stepping stone towards substantive change.

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